

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
Date: Dec. 4, 2005
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Probably the most challenging thing that I face in my garden every year, is how to control all those things that come to eat my plants, make them sick or crowd them out: the slugs, the aphids, the black spot and the weeds. Each spring I hope that they will give up on my garden, but just when I am setting out my bedding plants or my seeds are emerging, they reappear. And unless I do something to control them, they are content to stay and do their damage.

The most promising method that I have found is Integrated Pest Management. Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is a systematic way of preventing the pests that invade your garden from becoming a problem and it puts you, the gardener, in charge. To develop your own integrated pest management program, there are several steps that you can follow to get you going in the right direction. At times, you may need help in identifying a weed or bug or developing a method for control. When that happens, call or visit your local WSU Extension Master Gardener Clinic and you will have access to well-trained people and a variety of the latest research-based literature to help. Reading more about each of the steps outlined here will also help you know more about this process and assist you in choosing methods that will work in your garden.

Think about your tolerance level, too. How much unsightliness are you willing to tolerate? How much energy are you willing to invest? All gardens have some weeds and some pests and survive. All gardens should have beneficial insects and using IPM reduces the likelihood that they will be damaged.

Start your own IPM by *monitoring* what is happening in your garden. Look closely at your plants for damage, search for the culprits and look carefully at the weeds that are growing where you don't want weeds. Make notes, because every season can produce different pests and different weeds and you will want to choose different methods of controlling them. How they are controlled depends on their individual characteristics. *Identify* your pests and weeds and seek assistance if you don't know what they are. Knowing the characteristics of pests or weeds allows you to select a specific control strategy.

There are different methods to choose from when you develop you plan your pest control: cultural, physical and chemical are three. Starting with cultural controls means less work in the long run, and less damage to the environment. Cultural pest management is preventative. Select resistant and tolerant strains to plant. Select the right plant for the right place in your garden. For example select shade plants for shady areas, sun lovers for the sunny areas, drought tolerant plants for dry areas. Plants that are stressed by environmental factors are vulnerable to pests because all their energy is directed to basic survival and weakened plants invite pests. Fertilize according to your plants nutritional needs, rotate annuals to fool your pest population and keep your garden free of debris, since pests over winter in plant debris. Keep weeds at a minimum since they can also harbor pests as well as compete for water and nutrients that keep garden plants healthy. A healthy garden is your first line of defense and the most effective pest management method.

Physical methods of controlling pests include removing by hand and dropping pests in soapy water. This requires diligence and patience. Pruning away infested areas of a plant and destroying the infested plant matter can also control problem infestations. A hard spray of water from the hose will knock off aphids, mites, lacebugs, mealybugs and spittlebugs. Barriers, like

copper strips, will discourage slugs and snails. Pruning plants so that they are less dense allows birds to see the bugs and help control your pests for you.

Chemical methods of disease, weed and pest control raise concerns because of potential toxicity to humans, other plants, animals and beneficial organisms. Use chemical pest controls only when other methods have failed. Be very specific to the problem you are encountering, choose the least toxic alternative and apply only to the affected areas. Using chemical controls requires doing some research. Contacting your local WSU Extension Master Gardener Clinic can help make your choices easier.

IPM is a guide to good gardening and a wonderful management tool. You can increase your effectiveness as a gardener and decrease your reliance on chemicals, without sacrificing the beauty of your garden.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.
